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# WAR, PEACE, AND A GEOGRAPHICAL INTERNATIONALISM: THE 1871 ANTWERP INTERNATIONAL GEOGRAPHICAL CONGRESS

Toshiyuki SHIMAZU\*

*Abstract* This paper aims to contribute to the emerging field of the geographies of conferences by discussing the multiple meanings of the first International Geographical Congress held in Antwerp in 1871. While it has generally been said that the agenda of the Antwerp congress was largely in harmony with the rise of colonialism and expansionism, my attention here is paid mainly to the peace aspect of the congress after the termination of the Franco-Prussian War. The Antwerp congress was intended to function as a peace-oriented international assembly of geographers and related scholars, though it was postponed for one year because of the outbreak of the war. One of the most important European port cities, Antwerp was located on the northern fringe of Belgium, a neutral country during the war. The congress was organized mainly by Belgian scholars, the leader of whom was Charles Ruelens, a broad-minded intellectual whose concerns included geography. Some members of the Société de Géographie in Paris were also actively engaged in the overall management of the congress. British and French delegates celebrated the congress as a festival of peace and friendship, although underlying social and political tensions overshadowed the apparent success of the congress. In addition, almost all of the congress participants came from European countries. Therefore, peace as imagined by the congress attendees was not of a global nature, but a geographically limited one.

**Key words:** history of geography, geographical thought, Franco-Prussian War, Charles Ruelens, Belgium

## 1. Introduction

Geography has long been concerned with the production and communication of geographical knowledge by means of oral presentations, texts, maps, and other visual images. As such, geography has been regarded as an intellectual tool for national governance, colonial control, and military invasion. Imaginative geographies as representations of the Other have been largely accused of emanating from the existing power relations often associated with colonialism or imperialism. In 1916, when World War I was at its height, German geographer Albrecht Penck

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\* Department of Geography, Wakayama University

published an article entitled 'War and the Study of Geography (Der Krieg und das Studium der Geographie),' in which he quoted a motto, 'knowledge is power, geographical knowledge is world power (Wissen ist Macht, geographisches Wissen ist Weltmacht)' (Penck 1916). This motto had been propagated by Justus Perthes based in Gotha, a geographical publishing house famous for its *Petermanns Geographische Mitteilungen* (Haack 1913a, b). Three years later in 1919, the same year the Treaty of Versailles severely punished Germany, British geographer Halford Mackinder published his influential book *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, in which he passionately celebrated Germany for its unparalleled achievement in geography education by saying that 'every educated German is a geographer' (Mackinder 1919).

On the other hand, Charles Close, former Director General of the Ordnance Survey, put it in 1928 as follows: 'Science is essentially international, ... This is especially the case with geography, which, of all branches of knowledge, requires most to be studied from the standpoint of a citizen of the world' (Close 1928). Thus, geographical knowledge has also been conceived of as possessing an internationalist dimension. In fact, geography and geographers have been mobilized in attempts to build a world of mutual understanding and peace. For example, American geographer Isaiah Bowman played a decisive part in demarcating the new boundary of Poland at the Paris Peace Conference (Smith 2003). Another geographical expert at the same conference was French geographer Emmanuel de Martonne, who took part in extending the territory of Romania (Palsky 2002). It goes without saying that peace has been at most times not for everyone but for someone. The Paris Peace Conference was no exception, and it eventually brought about within the newly demarcated national boundaries in Central and Eastern Europe a number of discontented ethnic enclaves or 'sore spots' as they were termed by Australian geographer Griffith Taylor (Taylor 1946).

My purpose here is to shed some light on the peace aspect of geography by examining the first international geographical congress held in the Belgian port city of Antwerp from the 14th to the 22nd of August, 1871. In doing so, this paper aims to contribute to the emerging field of the geographies of conferences (Craggs and Mahony 2014). The historical meaning of the Antwerp congress has already been discussed in the context of colonialism and expansionism prevalent in late nineteenth century Europe (Vandersmissen 2009). Apart from this, the congress might have had another dimension when seen from the perspective shared by some of the actual conveners and participants, given that the congress took place only three months after the conclusion of the Treaty of Frankfurt which ended the Franco-Prussian War. In this paper, I shall focus especially on the peace ideals of the Antwerp congress, as well as on its actual realities.

## **2. A Peace-Oriented Congress Initiative in Time of War**

Belgium had been a neutral country since the 1839 Treaty of London and therefore kept its neutrality during the Franco-Prussian War. This positionality constituted part of the context in which a peace-oriented international congress initiative was elaborated in Belgium, though geography itself had not been a major subject of study there. To the contrary, the effectiveness of geography education in Germany had been seriously recognized by its continental rival some fifty years before the Treaty of Versailles. The Franco-Prussian War had resulted in the triumph of Prussia and, in 1871, the very same palace where the 1919 treaty would later be concluded was

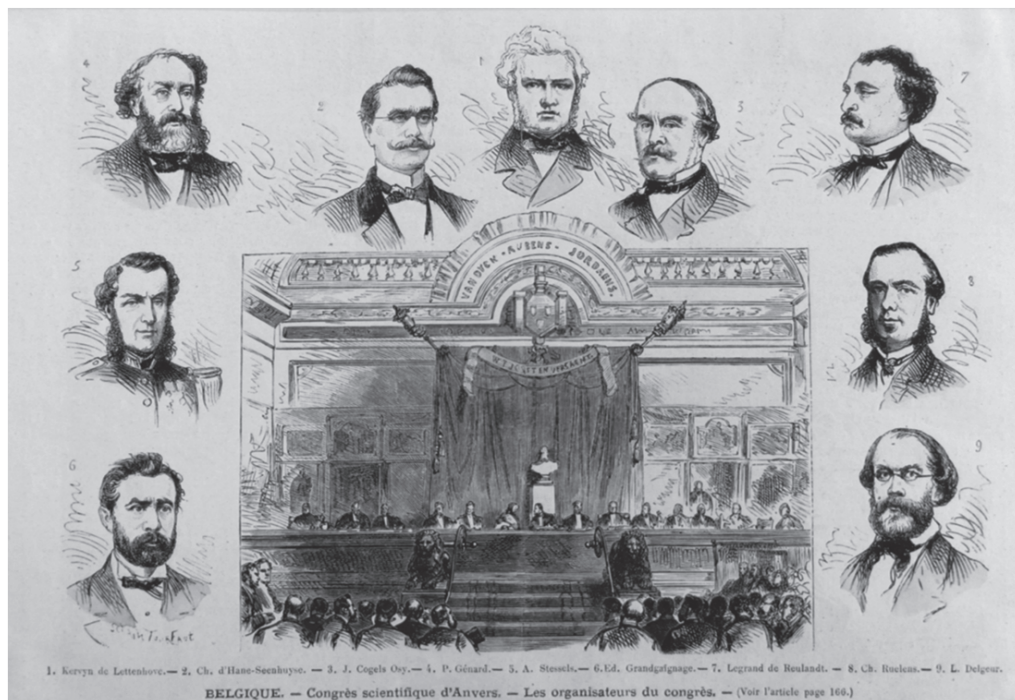
occupied by the German Empire. France's defeat led to the signing of the Treaty of Frankfurt under which France surrendered Alsace-Lorraine to the empire of Wilhelm I and Bismarck. All of these functioned as a catalyst forcing France to recognize the importance of geographic research and education. After that, geography gained momentum in the French educational system and was rapidly institutionalized in academia under the leadership of Paul Vidal de la Blache. Another feature was the diffusion of geographical societies in provincial France, following the foundation of the Société de Géographie de Lyon in 1873. This 'geographical fever' or 'geographical movement' was largely in tandem with the rise of French colonialism (McKay 1943; Clout 2009).

On October 15, 1869, a communication from an associate conservator at the Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique was introduced at the meeting of the Société de Géographie in Paris (Ruelens 1869). At that time, simultaneously in Rupelmonde and in Antwerp, there were plans to erect statues of Gerardus Mercator and Abraham Ortelius (Shimazu 2014). In that communication, Charles Ruelens, a broad-minded intellectual whose concerns included geography, proposed 'to convene at the foot of their statues representatives of geographical sciences, to draw them together in a congress, in order for them to be able to discuss together some of those larger issues about which human intelligence is concerned.' In Ruelens' view, the congress should be assembled in August 1870 in Antwerp, one of the most important European port cities. His initial plan was more scholarly than political, and peace-oriented. His 1869 vision of the congress included overcoming 'distances, difference in nationality, and sometimes even hostile prejudices' (Anonymous 1872a). This was in sharp contrast to the Conférence Géographique de Bruxelles held in Antwerp's rival city Brussels in 1876. That was obviously oriented towards the colonization of Central Africa under the maneuvers of King Leopold II of Belgium (Bederman 1989).

Thus, from its starting point, the Antwerp congress was destined to have an international aspect and a peace orientation. On November 24, 1869, the congress was named the 'Congrès International des Sciences Géographiques, Cosmographiques et Commerciales.' The first circular was distributed on January 15, 1870 and a definite program for the congress was announced on May 15, 1870 (see section 3). The latter included a foreword letter from the Belgian organizing commission for the congress, in which the commission explained that 'the congress of Antwerp will have great merit for science, it will powerfully serve the great cause of peace, and moreover, it will provide a milestone on the road to progress.' However, on July 28, 1870, a sudden announcement was made by the organizing commission postponing the congress until August of the following year due to the 'serious events,' which referred to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. It seems particularly important that the congress was not considered to be cancelled due to fears of being attacked from both sides of the country. As Charles Ruelens once put it, the congress was to be 'the honor of the century, the forerunner of this era of peace and fraternity which we indeed glimpse.' The organizing commission members also felt that they had to fulfill 'a high mission,' that is, 'to bring intelligence back to the work of civilization and peace' and 'to bring together in a scientific congress elite men whom politics had temporarily divided' (Anonymous 1872a).

In 1871, things changed drastically. The plan to erect a statue of Ortelius in Antwerp was suspended mainly because of the death of Léonard de Cuyper, an ardent sculptor. By contrast, a bronze statue of Mercator was dedicated in Rupelmonde on May 14 in advance of the congress, probably against the will of the organizing commission members (Anonymous 1872a). These

issues in part blurred the initial meaning attached to the congress. On the other hand, the conclusion of the Treaty of Frankfurt on May 10 provided a more favorable setting for the congress. That was, in a sense, a golden opportunity for the organizing commission to fulfill 'a high mission' as mentioned above. Finally, the commission decided to begin the congress on August 14.



**Fig. 1** Drawing of the first International Geographical Congress in Antwerp, 1871. Source: *Le Monde Illustré*, No. 752, 9 Septembre 1871, p. 164.

### 3. Peace and Its Limitations in the Antwerp Congress

On September 9, 1871, an impressive drawing of the first International Geographical Congress appeared in *Le Monde Illustré*, a French illustrated newspaper. Charles Ruelens was numbered 8 on the middle right side (Fig. 1). This meant that the congress was considered not as a local Antwerp event but as one of the international news items. The proceedings of the congress published the following year numbered its 'adherents' at as many as 600 from 20 countries, of whom 304 were from Belgium (51%), 96 from France (16%), 50 from the United Kingdom (8.3%), 32 from the Netherlands (5.3%), 30 from Austria-Hungary (5%), 26 from Germany (4.3%), 13 from Italy (2.2%), 11 from the Americas (1.8%), 10 from Russia (1.7%), and remaining 28 from eight other countries (Sweden-Norway, Spain, Switzerland, Denmark, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Turkey). Some members of the Société de Géographie in Paris were actively engaged in the preparation of the congress, which accounts for France's high share of attendees in spite of its

defeat by Prussia. By contrast, the newly-formed victorious German Empire had only a low share of attendees in spite of its famed inclination towards geography. This might be in part because there were still deep-rooted political tensions between the two countries. Nevertheless, in response to the invitation of the organizing commission, the Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin sent as its representative Heinrich Kiepert, Professor of Geography at the University of Berlin. While the actual number of attendees remains unclear, the multiplicity of nationalities observed from the proceedings indicates the international character of the geographical congress in Antwerp (Anonymous 1872a). Needless to say, it was only a limited internationalism. European adherents dominated, and there were no Africans or Asians. In terms of attendees, the congress was not of a global nature. Rather, it seemed to reflect ‘the Eurocentrism of geography as a discipline’ (Stadelbauer 2012). This means that even if the attendees spoke of peace at the congress, this kind of peace was a geographically limited one.

The congress was preceded by a reception at the Hôtel de Ville on August 13. Charles d’Hane-Steenhuysse, president of the organizing committee, delivered a greeting in French, which was followed by a welcoming speech in Dutch, French, German, and English by the city’s alderman Jean Van den Bergh-Elsen in place of the mayor. This was further translated orally into Spanish, Danish, and Swedish. A brochure carrying multiple translations of the alderman’s speech was distributed among attendees (Stad Antwerpen 1871).

The main congress was held at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts, where a geographical exposition open to the public also took place at an attached museum. Here were exhibited over 600 items including maps, atlases, globes, and geography books (Anonymous 1871a). On August 14, when the main congress began, the Antwerp-based newspaper *Le Précurseur* reported that ‘on this occasion, the tower of the cathedral, the city hall, and the museum were adorned with flags’ (Anonymous 1871b). It is evident that the city of Antwerp also committed itself in a showy display for this peace-oriented congress.

The Belgian organizing commission had already announced the program for the congress on May 15, 1870 (see section 2). It had comprised a total of 87 ‘questions’ and they had been classified into four categories: (A) geography; (B) cosmography; (C) navigation, voyages, commerce, meteorology, and statistics; and (D) ethnography. Of 87 questions, 26 were concerned with (A), 22 with (B), 36 with (C), and remaining 3 with (D). During the term of the main congress, 18 supplementary questions were added, of which 10 were concerned with (A), 1 with (B), 2 with (C), and remaining 5 with (D). Finally, the sum total of the questions amounted to 105 (Anonymous 1872a,b). The main congress comprised three types of sessions, that is, general sessions, thematic sessions, and evening sessions. The questions mentioned above were almost all discussed at any of these sessions. It is worth mentioning that the evening sessions were held at another venue, the famous Théâtre Royal, and was open to the public. Prominent scholars and explorers delivered their lectures. Among them were John B. Brown and Stephen Joseph Perry from the United Kingdom; Ignace Carboneille from Belgium; Francis Garnier, Jules Garnier, Jean-Louis-Armand de Quatrefages de Bréau, and Ignace Joseph Silberman from France; Wilhelm Heine from the United States; and François Paul Louis Pollen from the Netherlands. Most of the themes with which these public lectures dealt were concerned with geographical knowledge of the non-European world. There was a sort of expansionism and exoticism, though it was modest and unpretentious. This means that there were some gaps between the ideals and realities of the first International Geographical Congress, where a geographical internationalism



potentially contributing to both peace and expansionism prevailed. Another potential source of conflict was the issue of the prime meridian. The Antwerp congress recommended Greenwich for the world's prime meridian (Anonymous 1872b). Four years later, in 1875, the French camp brought the issue up again at the second International Geographical Congress in Paris, where one group suggested that the island of Ferro should be adopted as the prime meridian (Meyer 1882).

Turning back to the peace dimension, three things are worth noting. The first is the issue of the Suez Canal. It is remarkable that the neutralization of the canal was requested by a resolution from this congress, which was seventeen years in advance of the Convention of Constantinople signed in 1888. The second is the attendance of Pedro II, Emperor of Brazil, on August 15. He was a scholarly sovereign who abolished slavery in Brazil in 1888. He delivered a brief greeting at the afternoon general session as follows: 'I am pleased to find myself in the middle of this congress of geography. I belong to two geographical societies, in London and in Paris. I have the pleasure to find in this assembly several members of these societies' (Anonymous 1872a). The third is the official excursion to the stone sepulcher of Ortelius at the Antwerp Cathedral and to the bronze statue of Mercator in Rupelmonde. The excursion was held on Sunday, August 20, and it was exactly the day of the 'grand kermesse' of Antwerp. So the streets were filled with real festivity (Fleury-Flobert 1872; Anonymous 1872b). The kermesse of Antwerp used to take place on the Sunday following Assumption Day, August 15. One British novelist described this kermesse, in one of her works, as 'the most important festival of the world' (Macquoid 1868). This helps to support the characterization of the first International Geographical Congress as a kind of peace festival.

On August 22, the last day of the congress, at the afternoon general session special honorary medals were awarded to Francis Garnier, to Ferdinand de Lesseps, and to David Livingstone who was missing in Central Africa. About three months later, Livingstone was found by Henry Morton Stanley, who was later hired by King Leopold II as an aftereffect of the *Conférence Géographique de Bruxelles* in 1876. Also receiving awards were some exhibitors at the geographical exposition including Heinrich Kiepert from the German Empire and Pierre Émile Levasseur from the French Republic (Anonymous 1872b). Here again, peace and expansionism coexisted at the *Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts*.

After the congress, British and French delegates both celebrated it as a festival of peace and friendship. Erasmus Ommanney, from the Royal Geographical Society, spoke of this kind of international congress as 'encouraging sentiments of friendship and good will between nations' (Ommanney 1872). Marie-Armand de Castéra-Macaya d'Avezac, from the French Government, emotionally noted that 'being delayed, changed, and adjourned at the mercy of cruel vicissitudes which devastated Europe, this congress was accomplished' (D'Avezac 1872). Richard Cortambert, from the *Société de Géographie* in Paris, eloquently wrote that 'we finished a pacific congress, and strangely, without battling!' (Cortambert 1871). Fleury-Flobert, from the *Académie Nationale Agricole, Manufacturière et Commerciale*, also referred to the congress as 'this pacific festival from where we geographers brought back the best souvenir' (Fleury-Flobert 1871). However, needless to say, not all of the French geographers felt peace at the Antwerp congress. For example, Élisée Reclus had been among the congress adherents but could not attend because of his imprisonment resulting from his support for the Paris Commune. As mentioned above, this kind of peace was one with spatio-temporal limits.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has dealt with the first International Geographical Congress in Antwerp in 1871. Attention was especially paid to the peace aspect of the congress. The Antwerp congress was initially intended to be a peace-oriented international assembly to discuss topics of geography and related sciences. The Belgian organizing commission including Charles Ruelens expected that such a discussion would lead to the advancement of human knowledge and mutual understanding. In reality, peace and its limitations coexisted at this Eurocentric assembly. It can be argued that the geographical power relations of the day were simultaneously reflected and constructed in the Antwerp geographical congress. Nevertheless, the congress could also be characterized as an important milestone in efforts to build a peace-oriented geographical internationalism. These findings, I hope, will in some degree contribute to the emerging field of the geographies of conferences.

Needless to say, efforts have continued to build peace through geographical internationalism. It must be noted that the present International Geographical Union (IGU) was formed as part of the international movement for the unification of the sciences to realize world peace after World War I. And again, Belgium played an important role. The Palais des Académies in Brussels was where the IGU was originally set up in 1922 at the second General Assembly of the International Research Council (A. R. H. 1922). Then, what about the present IGU? Is it really functioning as an ideal promoter of global peace through mediating and reconciling geographic differences?

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